

Women in the Iroquois Confederacy

Clan Mothers

- chose and advised the Hoyaneh
- had a strong indirect influence on decisions

Women

- participated in Women's Councils which advised the Clan Mothers
- used consensus

Who's Who in the Iroquois Confederacy: Women

Women had two ways to make their voices heard: as Clan Mothers and through Women's Councils.

Clan Mothers were usually the oldest and most respected women in their clans. The title was hereditary and passed on to the woman relative that was thought to be best suited for the position. Clan Mothers were responsible for their clan's welfare and for maintaining harmony and balance within the clans and nations. They selected the Hoyaneh, the male leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Great Law of Peace said the Hoyaneh had to put the needs of their people first. The Clan Mothers could replace Hoyaneh who failed to do this.

Within each clan, Women's Councils and Men's Councils advised the Clan Mothers. The Clan Mothers in turn advised their Hoyaneh of the people's position on issues. How did this process ensure that both men and women had a voice in their government?

Women's Councils developed positions on important issues. Women who were not Clan Mothers took part in councils. Through consensus, they advised the Clan Mothers.



Clan Mothers continue to play an important role in Iroquois society today. This photo shows Audrey Shenandoah, a Clan Mother of the Eel Clan of the Onondaga Nation. She participated in a Summit of the Elders at the United Nations in 1995, where she provided an Iroquois perspective on environmental issues.